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Roca Barea's Public Mythistory

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Abstract: One of Spain's best-known public historians is an academic outsider, María Elvira Roca Barea. This article contextualizes and briefly surveys her work, which defends empires in general and the Spanish Empire in particular. Rather than revisit the extensive historiographical debate, it focuses on the 'public' aspect of her public history. By examining her extensive digital media profile, it considers the ecology of the groups and media outlets that give her a platform, the social and political currents she endorses or which support her, and the social and political impact of her work. It finds that her imperial apologetics are selective, that Hispanophobia as embodied in the *leyenda negra* [Black Legend] is her real target, and that she offers a Spanish version of what William McNeill called 'mythistory.' It argues that while many of her values are right-wing populist, and while she positions herself as a centrist, she nevertheless appeals to some on the left by positioning Spain as an outsider in a world dominated by 'Anglo-Saxon' capitalism. Her call for greater unity within 'Hispanidad' [the Hispanic world] gestures towards a deeply contested but truly international public history in the service of geopolitical ends.

Keywords: Spanish empire; black legend; hispanic world; hispanidad; public history in Spain; leyenda negra

1 Introduction

"Great nations have not been made from within, but from without," wrote the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset.¹ Empire has been important to Spain. Its national day, October 12, is the day Christopher Columbus first sighted the Americas. As a regenerationist, Ortega wanted to halt Spain's apparent decline and revitalize his country in the decades following the

loss of most of its colonies through war with the United States in the 'Disaster' of 1898.² He feared the end of the collective imperial endeavor presaged Spain's disintegration.

In 2016, a new voice revived his concern with the disintegration of Spain: María Elvira Roca Barea, author of *Imperiofobia y leyenda negra* [Imperialophobia and the Black Legend]. One of Spain's best-known and most controversial public historians, Roca Barea has ignited a substantial historiographical debate driven by her polemical arguments. Rather than add to that busy field, this article focuses on the 'public' aspect of her work: how her history is disseminated, its political context and function, and its significance. It briefly surveys the key themes in her work, examines how she fits into the Spanish political landscape, considers the role of real and imagined Hispanophobia in explaining her appeal, and assesses her work's significance using the ideas of nation branding, mythistory and international public history.

Imperiofobia is an account of Spain as an international outsider written by an academic outsider.³ A philologist and doctor of medieval literature, Roca Barea has taught at Harvard, Málaga and Luxembourg universities but has worked mainly in secondary and post-secondary education, proud to style herself "una maestra de pueblo" [a village teacher] in contrast to her tenured "alpha male" academic critics.⁴ This outsider status has given her a certain freedom. Her work has been called pleasing, reactionary, disordered, tempestuous, passionate, and occasionally violent.⁵ She takes sideswipes at Protestants, the Spanish left, foreign Hispanists, and even the novelist Pérez Reverte. Accessible and speaking to readers' emotions, the book has become a phenomenon, with over 200,000 sales.⁶ She followed up her success with 2019's

2 Andrew Dobson, *An Introduction to the Politics and Philosophy of José Ortega y Gasset* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 86. Though there is some debate about how important the 'Disaster' was to the regenerationist movement, at a minimum it acted as a catalyst for concerns about 'the problem of Spain.'

3 María Elvira Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia y Leyenda Negra: Roma, Rusia, Estados Unidos y el Imperio Español*, 20th ed. (Madrid: Siruela, 2016).

4 She also serves on a scientific council at the University of Nebrija.

5 Arturo Pérez Reverte, "Arturo Pérez-Reverte Responde a Elvira Roca Barea: 'Conspirofobia y Otros Asuntos,'" *El Mundo*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.elmundo.es/cultura/literatura/2020/01/02/5e0df5a6fdff064b8b4579.html>; Arcadi Espada – an admirer! – preface to Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia*, 14.

6 Emilia Landaluce, "Elvira Roca Barea Viaja a las Tinieblas de Zúgar-ramurdi: 'La Inquisición Tenía Más Garantías Que los Tribunales Civiles,'" *El Mundo*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.elmundo.es/papel/historias/2023/03/21/6419db96fddff5cbe8b4597.html>.

1 José Ortega y Gasset, *España Invertebrada* (Madrid: Calpe, 1921), 35. All translations are the author's own, unless otherwise indicated.

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Fracasología [Failurology], a chapter in an edited collection about Spanish Mexico, a comic strip, and three books of historical fiction, one with an inquisitor as hero.⁷ She also inspired a 2021 documentary by the distinguished filmmaker López-Linares on Spain's role in "the first globalization."⁸ Veteran of a host of media interviews and conference presentations, Roca Barea is energetic and adept at making history public, connecting the local to the global in her talks. Her most popular YouTube video has been viewed almost 360,000 times.⁹

Three key developments have shaped her work.¹⁰ First, the financial crisis of 2008 saw a reversal of fortune for Spain, which began with better financial statistics than Germany but ended stigmatized by the markets as one of the South European PIGS (Portugal, Italy, Greece, Spain).¹¹ Secondly, in 2012 the autonomous Spanish community of Catalonia began the separatist *procés*, leading to the suppressed referendum of 2017 and negative international press coverage of the Spanish government. Finally, events across the Americas shook up the Hispanic world. Donald Trump's first US government built a fence to stop 'bad hombres' from crossing the US-Mexican border, a stance accentuated in his second term by making English the sole federal official language. In 2019, Mexican President López Obrador asked Spain to formally apologize for its involvement in colonialism.¹² His demand was echoed

by Colombia and Venezuela. The Black Lives Matter summer of 2020 saw dozens of statues of Columbus and Spanish missionary Junípero Serra removed or vandalized in the USA and Mexico.¹³ Roca Barea fears that "Spain" has become a dirty word and that Spaniards have internalized their image as "the bad guys." Like Ortega, with whom she is in critical dialogue, she fears a lack of national self-belief will lead to "balkanization."¹⁴

2 Key Themes: Black Legend, Empire, and Hispanicity

The concept of the *leyenda negra* [Black Legend] denotes Spain as the victim of Hispanophobic propaganda, spread by Protestant foreigners, with Spanish cruelty during the Inquisition and the conquest of America at its core.¹⁵ The idea was popularized by the regenerationist Julián Juderías, who complained that Spain was portrayed as "inquisitorial, ignorant, fanatical, incapable of figuring among cultured peoples" and "prone to violent repressions; an enemy of progress and innovations."¹⁶ To Juderías, this mattered because countries live by their reputations, so anticipating Simon Anholt's concept of "nation branding."¹⁷ Later authors have played the *leyenda* down. Sánchez León sees it as an artificial conflation of disconnected episodes in the interests of nationalist essentialism.¹⁸ Villanueva saw it as a

7 María Elvira Roca Barea, *Fracasología: España y sus Élites: de los Afrancesados a Nuestros Días* (Madrid: Espasa, 2019); María Elvira Roca Barea, "¿Frontera, Con Quién?" in *La Disputa del Pasado: España, México y la Leyenda Negra*, ed. Emilio Lamo de Espinosa (Madrid: Turner, 2021); Elvira Roca Barea and Enrique Breccia, "La Primera Vuelta al Mundo de Elcano, en Cómics," *El Mundo*, September 9, 2022, <https://www.elmundo.es/album/la-lectura/2022/09/09/631a2ebde4d4d87a698b4575.html>; María Elvira Roca Barea, *6 Relatos Ejemplares 6*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Siruela, 2018); Elvira Roca Barea, *Las Brujas y el Inquisidor* (Madrid: Espasa, 2023); Elvira Roca Barea, *Ingrata Patria* (Madrid: Espasa, 2025).

8 *España la Primera Globalización*, directed by José Luis López-Linares (Madrid: Lopez-Li Films, 2021), DVD. A follow-up was released in 2024: *Hispanoamérica: Canta de Vida y Esperanza*, directed by José Luis López-Linares (Madrid: Lopez-Li Films, 2024), DVD.

9 As of December 20, 2024. "María Elvira Roca Barea – Conferencia 'Lutero y su Mundo,'" YouTube video, 49:22. Posted by "Cima & Holzenthal," April 26, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tq5sRVrO_IY.

10 The events described in this paragraph resemble those covered in Sebastián Faber, *Leyendas Negras, Marcas Blancas: La Malsana Obsesión Con la Imagen de España en el Mundo* (n.p.: Escritos Contextuarios, 2022), though Faber attaches less importance to stereotyping in the "PIGS" crisis.

11 A second 'I' was sometimes added for Ireland.

12 "Carta del Presidente López Obrador al Rey de España, 25 de marzo de 2019," Gobierno de México, <https://www.gob.mx/amlo/documentos/carta-del-presidente-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-a-felipe-vi-rey-de-espana>.

13 Junípero Serra was a Franciscan friar who founded missions in what is now California. Recent controversy surrounds the implication of the missions in colonialism and the way in which they treated Native Americans.

14 María Elvira Roca Barea, "Hispanidad Con Futuro," *Instituto Cervantes* video, 1:19:04, October 11, 2017. <https://videos.cervantes.es/hispanidad-con-futuro/>, 9:49, 11:08, 21:40; Roca Barea, *Fracasología*, 13.

15 Although the term "Black Legend" is objectionable, the term is now deeply embedded in Spanish historical discourse.

16 Julian Juderías, *La Leyenda Negra: Estudios Acerca del Concepto de España en el Extranjero* 2nd ed. (Salamanca: Junta de Castillo y León, [1917] 1997), 24. The term was coined by Emilia Pardo Bazán.

17 Juderías, *La Leyenda Negra*, 18; Simon Anholt, "Why Brand? Some Practical Considerations for Nation Branding," *Place Branding* 2 no. 2, (2006): 97–107.

18 Pablo Sánchez León, "Pensar Históricamente la(s) Leyenda(s) Negra(s): de los Relatos Críticos del Pasado a la Retórica Ideológica en el Presente," *Nuestra Historia* 15 (2023): 89–114, 92.

device to justify 20th-century dictatorships.¹⁹ García Cárcel, in the year of the successful 1992 Barcelona Olympics – and the quincentenary of Columbus' first voyage – thought the time had come to bury the *leyenda* now that Spain was fully part of the European family.²⁰ Ortega's prescription, "Spain was the problem and Europe the solution" had seemingly been fulfilled.²¹ By contrast, *Imperiofobia* revisits and updates Juderías.²²

By 'imperiofobia' Roca Barea means the negative propaganda empires provoke by their success. She examines the empires of Rome, the United States, and Russia to make this argument. However, Britain is excluded because, she claims, it did not threaten its European neighbors and so inspired no imperiofobia.²³ Spain's *leyenda negra* is presented as an example of how propaganda serves rivals' political and psychological needs. Roca Barea traces its evolution through Italian humanism, the Reformation, the Dutch wars, and French Enlightenment to the USA of the 1890s. In a revised edition of *Imperiofobia*, Roca Barea also blames internal critics for the persistence of the *leyenda*, namely the Catholic Church, Francophile elites, and 19th-century liberal historians.²⁴ She speculatively blames the *leyenda* for Spain's high interest rates in the 2008 financial crisis: she believes Spaniards paid the price of northern European Protestant prejudice.²⁵

Her account of Spain's overseas empire is populist, "defensive and belligerent."²⁶ In her selective narrative, the Spanish Empire brought peace, prosperity, justice,

healthcare, education, and civilization to its subjects; former rulers are positioned as tyrants; indigenous collaboration with the Spanish colonizers is highlighted, but indigenous resistance is marginalized.²⁷ There are significant silences: forced labor and slavery are barely discussed, the latter chiefly to undermine Bartolomé de Las Casas, an early critic of the Spanish Conquista and a key source for the *leyenda negra*.²⁸ She thinks enough has been written about the wrongdoings of the empire: mistakes were made but "conquest is not a picnic in the country."²⁹ Jesuits and paternalist monarchs represent the true essence of the empire: gold-bugs and land-grabbers do not. Critiques of colonialism are seen as inapplicable: within Castilian institutions, Spanish possessions in the Americas had equal status to the peninsula. This view ignores the fact that these possessions had no representation in the Cortes until 1810.³⁰ Though not a Buenoist, she echoes Gustavo Bueno in contrasting a benign Spanish Empire with an exploitative British one.³¹ Her main argument, anticipated by others, is that unlike British North America, the Spanish New World saw significant interethnic biological and cultural mixing, called *mestizaje*.³² She locates the roots of modern racism in a Calvinist belief in predestination, and positions this against Catholic universalism. Disregarding evidence of social and

19 Jesús Villanueva, *Leyenda Negra: una Polémica Nacionalista en la España del Siglo XIX* (Madrid: Catarata, 2011).

20 Ricardo García Cárcel, *Leyenda Negra: Historia y Opinión* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1998).

21 José Ortega y Gasset, *Obras Completas. Tomo II* (1916) (Madrid: Editorial Taurus, Fundación José Ortega y Gasset, 2004), 86–102, quoted in Luis Alberto Moretinos Lagartos (ed.), "Fragmentos de Textos Sobre el Pensamiento Europeo de José Ortega y Gasset (Madrid, 1883–1955)," *Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes*, https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/portales/europeistas_espanoles/textos_de_jose_ortega_y_gasset/#pedagogia_social.

22 Ricardo García Cárcel, "La Imagen de España y la Leyenda Negra" in *Piedra a Piedra: la Construcción de la Historia Moderna a la Sombra de los Catedrales*, eds. Cristina Borreguero Beltrán et al. (Burgos: Universidad de Burgos, 2022), 19–47, 34.

23 Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia*, 409.

24 In effect, she incorporates the arguments developed in *Fracasología* into her earlier book. "Reflexiones Finales" in María Elvira Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia y leyenda negra: Roma, Rusia, Estados Unidos y el Imperio español*, revised and expanded (Madrid: Siruela, 2022), Kindle edition.

25 Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia*, 457–71.

26 Her own description. *Ibid.*, 294. Alan Lester uses the concept of populism in his critique of public imperial apologetics in the UK. Alan Lester, *Deny and Disavow: Distancing the Imperial Past in the Culture Wars* (London: Sunrise, 2022), Kindle edition.

27 Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia*, 293–347. For a detailed critique of her views on Spain's American empire, see José Luis Villacañas, *Imperiofilia y el populismo nacional católico* (Madrid: Lengua de Trapo, 2019), 169–94.

28 Las Casas initially saw African slaves as a suitable alternative to the enslavement of Amerindians.

29 Roca Barea, "Hispanidad Con Futuro," 23:00; David Barreira, "Elvira Roca: 'La Gente Piensa Que la Reconquista es de Franco y Ahora de Vox. Es un Carajal,'" *El Español*, October 8, 2019, https://www.elespanol.com/cultura/historia/20191008/elvira-roca-piensa-reconquista-franco-vox-carajal/434957151_0.html.

30 Pilar Ponce Leiva and Alexander Ponsen, "Administration and Government of the Iberian Empires," in *The Iberian World: 1450–1820*, eds. Fernando Bouza et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), Kindle edition.

31 García Cárcel, "La Imagen de España," 35. Gustavo Bueno, a former Marxist philosopher turned guru of the Spanish far right, believed Spain's was a "generative empire" in contrast to other "predatory" empires. Roca Barea is not a Buenoist despite her respect for Buenoist authors such as Pedro Insua and Iván Vélez. Buenoists find her work too psychological, insufficiently materialist, and atheoretical. See Emmanuel Martínez Alcocer, "Crítica de Fracasología, de María Elvira Roca Barea," *Posmodernia*, December 22, 2019, <https://posmodernia.com/critica-de-fracasologia-de-maria-elvira-roca-barea/>; and Edgar Straehle, "Melancolía Imperial y Leyenda Negra en el Paisaje Actual Español" in "Ecos Imperiales: Diálogos Sobre la *Imperio Nostalgia*" coord. Matteo Tomasoni y César Rina Simón, *Revista de Historia Jerónimo Zurita*, 99 (Special Issue, Otoño 2021), 35–77.

32 Gary Nash, "The Hidden History of Mestizo America," *Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (Dec. 1995), 941–64.

legal pigmentocracy, Roca Barea turns *mestizaje* into a central motif.³³ She argues Mexicans deny their own ancestry when they attack Spain. Under the empire, its inhabitants didn't go to "clean toilets in New York," as some Hispanic migrants do today.³⁴ She sees the Hispanic world as tragically divided against itself since the 1820s.

Her sweeping arguments touch on a vast academic literature, some supportive, much not.³⁵ She barely engages with the latter but as José Luis Villacañas points out, she aims to fight propaganda with propaganda.³⁶ His own *Imperiofilia* [Imperialophilia] gives a detailed and erudite rebuttal of her work but has not achieved the same level of readership, perhaps because of that very erudition. The respected Mexican anthropologist Federico Navarrete labels her treatment of indigenous collaboration superficial.³⁷ Edgar Straehle and *El País* have criticized her source handling, criticisms she claims are minor and evidence of a witch hunt against her.³⁸ Indeed, her stance as an outsider, attacking an academic establishment that has supposedly failed to defend Spain's reputation, gives her polemical work a revelatory quality in the eyes of some admirers: "I knew the history of Spain could not be as they taught it to me."³⁹

Roca Barea reached the apogee of her influence in October 2017. As the Catalan *procés* reached its climax, she was invited to give an address to the Instituto Cervantes. She chose as her theme 'Hispanidad,' a term popularized in the 1930s by the reactionary monarchist Ramiro de Maeztu.⁴⁰ It can refer to a people (the Hispanic world) or to a culture (Hispanicity). Roca

Barea titled her address 'Hispanidad con futuro' [Hispanicity with a future].⁴¹ In an opinion piece of the same name published the next day in *El Mundo*, she gave this rallying cry: "Hispanidad is the name of an immense, protean culture of improbable diversity and unpredictable in its marvelous unity. The language, our flagship, remains strong and is spreading."⁴²

3 Placing Roca Barea in the Political Landscape

Roca Barea rose to prominence against a shifting political landscape in the wake of the financial crisis. New parties emerged on the far right (Vox), center (Ciudadanos), and radical left (Podemos, followed by Sumar).⁴³ Peripheral and Spanish nationalisms grew and fed off each other. Ideological tensions emerged within the conservative Partido Popular (PP) over whether to cooperate with Vox, and within the PSOE (Socialists) over whether to cooperate with the radical left and with separatists.

Looking at the political ecology of the groups who have given her a platform, first there are the right-wing think tanks and media outlets. Her work has been most warmly received by the conservative press or digital media, such as *El Mundo*, *Libertad Digital* and the Buenoists Cima & Holzenthal. A number of *Libertad Digital* collaborators have connections to *elcato.org*, the Spanish-language incarnation of the right-wing libertarian US Cato Institute.⁴⁴ Second, numerous civil society, patrimonial and regional bodies have given her a platform or prize, some like the Fundación Villacisneros politically right-wing, others not, like the PSOE-led government of Andalusia.⁴⁵ Some patrimonial groups may be naturally conservative. Finally, there are universities and educational bodies of no clear political background.

³³ Peter Wade, "Images of Latin American *Mestizaje* and the Politics of Comparison," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 23, no. 3 (2004): 355–66.

³⁴ María Elvira Roca Barea, "Hispanidad Con Futuro," *El Mundo*, October 12, 2017, <https://www.elmundo.es/opinion/2017/10/12/59de5c9922601dff4a8b4590.html>

³⁵ The debate is by no means one-sided. See Pablo Sánchez León, "Los Historiadores y la Ultraderecha," *Conversación Sobre la Historia*, September 4, 2023, <https://conversacionsobrehistoria.info/2023/09/04/los-historiadores-y-la-ultraderecha/>.

³⁶ Villacañas, *Imperiofilia*, 221, 225.

³⁷ Federico Navarrete, "Una Polémica Sobre la Hispanidad," *Conversación Sobre la Historia*, July 24, 2021, <https://conversacionsobrehistoria.info/2021/07/24/una-polemica-sobre-la-hispanidad/>.

³⁸ Patricia R. Blanco, "Las Citas Tergiversadas del Superventas Sobre la Leyenda Negra Española," *El País*, December 20, 2019, https://elpais.com/cultura/2019/12/19/actualidad/1576745125_565402.html; Edgar Straehle, "Historia y Leyenda de la Leyenda Negra: Reflexiones Sobre Imperiofobia de María Elvira Roca Barea," *Nuestra Historia* 8 (2019): 113–37; María Elvira Roca Barea, "Elvira Roca Barea Contesta a El País: 'Hoy Cualquier Alusión a la Leyenda Negra Puede Ser Considerada Facha,'" *El Mundo*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.elmundo.es/papel/firmas/2019/12/31/5e0b4924fc6c831b0e8b457a.html>

³⁹ @Trompicavalas, n.d., 2021, comment on "María Elvira Roca Barea – Conferencia 'Lutero y su mundo.'"

⁴⁰ Ramón de Maeztu, *Defensa de la Hispanidad* (Madrid: Ediciones Rialp, [1934] 2017).

⁴¹ Roca Barea, "Hispanidad Con Futuro," 5:37. Cf. the concept of a diasporic "British World" deployed by anglophone historians such as Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

⁴² Roca Barea, "Hispanidad Con Futuro" (*El Mundo* version).

⁴³ The Ciudadanos party was founded in 2006 but only became a major force in the 2010s.

⁴⁴ For a list, see *elcato.org*, <https://www.elcato.org/search/google/libertad%20digital>

⁴⁵ The "Christian humanist" Fundación Villacisneros has been linked to the PP and Vox and described as "ultraconservative." Eva Saiz, "Polémica en Andalucía por la Firma de un Convenio Con una Fundación Ultraconservadora Para Que Hable de ETA en la Escuela" *El País*, January 31, 2024, <https://elpais.com/espana/andalucia/2024-01-31/polemica-en-andalucia-por-la-firma-de-un-convenio-con-una-fundacion-ultraconservadora-para-que-hable-de-eta-en-la-escuela.html>.

Most analyses of her politics have focused on her published work, but her numerous interviews and affiliations are just as important to her profile as a public historian. As a writer of historical fiction, she has joined an association of avowedly patriotic authors.⁴⁶ A former reservist, she has addressed fellow army volunteers but is cautious about supporting Ukraine, warning against pushing Russia closer to China.⁴⁷ She is cool towards what she sees as the excesses of radical feminism.⁴⁸ She has criticized school textbooks about the post-Franco Transition for their supposedly left-wing bias, and has called the Islamophile Andalusian politician Blas Infante, executed in the Civil War, “impulsive and an idiot,” provoking calls for her Andalusian medal of honor to be withdrawn.⁴⁹ In 2018 she signed a manifesto against the PSOE’s proposed new Law of Democratic Memory, subsequently arguing that such laws were totalitarian.⁵⁰ She has at times sounded ultra-Catholic, disparaging the “decaffeinated” faith now on offer.⁵¹ But she has sharpened her criticisms of the Church’s effect on the Spanish state since the

papal apology for colonialism in 2021, and is a non-Catholic from a masonic family.⁵²

As to her critics, Villacañas considers her outlook a dangerous and reactionary “national-catholic populism,” a reference to a Francoist ideology of the late 1940s that emphasized Spain’s Catholic identity and its civilizing mission in the New World.⁵³ Navarrete sees white conservative nationalism.⁵⁴ Alares and Acerete detect “a project of nationalist and sentimental mobilization.”⁵⁵ Sánchez León points out that *Imperiofobia* minimizes colonial violence and thinks it a key text linked to “reactionary political projects.”⁵⁶ Straehle observes that the *leyenda negra* has been appropriated by the PP, PSOE, and most stridently, by Vox. He notes Roca Barea’s political ambiguity, and states that she has not identified herself with any party and favors *transversal* [crosscutting] options.⁵⁷

Turning to the parties, Roca Barea has criticized the PP’s reluctance to clip the autonomous communities’ wings and is lukewarm about its initially centrist leader Alberto Núñez Feijóo.⁵⁸ Her themes have been adopted publicly by Madrid’s PP President Isabel Díaz Ayuso.⁵⁹ The musical *Malinche* about Cortés and his Amerindian interpreter, with a central theme of *mestizaje*, was staged by 1980s pop icon Nacho Cano with Ayuso’s support.⁶⁰ Madrid’s public education has been influenced by Roca Barea’s ideas.⁶¹ In June 2024 at a

46 Escritores Con la Historia [Writers with History]. Gustavo Alares López and Eduardo Acerete de la Corte, “La Extrema Derecha Española y el Neorevisionismo Imperial. Nostalgia, Conceptos y Narrativas,” *Historia del Presente* 43 (2024): 99–117, 107–8.

47 Emilia Landaluce, “María Elvira Roca Barea: ‘Hay Que Limpiar Todos los Excrecencias de los Nacionalismos,’” *El Mundo*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.elmundo.es/papel/historias/2018/05/21/5b0194e8e85fdeaeef738b45ea.html>; “Lecturas Reservistas Para el Verano (y II),” *Asociación ARES de Reservistas Españolas*, July 28, 2021, <https://ares-resvol.es/lecturas-reservistas-para-el-verano-y-ii/>; Julián Herrero, “Elvira Roca Barea: ‘Si Fueras Positiva Con el Futuro de Europa Sería Idiota,’” *La Razón*, October 5, 2022, <https://www.larazon.es/cultura/historia/20221005/uonyngmbzvbdjoncbltfc12v3e.html>.

48 Teresa Giménez, Elvira Roca Barea y otras 26 mujeres, “No Nacemos Víctimas,” *El País*, March 6, 2018, https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/03/05/opinion/1520273619_739464.html.

49 “Maria Elvira Roca Barea Desmontando el Relato de la Transición y la Mitología de Blas Infante,” YouTube video, 12:42. Posted by “Edul1917,” July 28, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4JX-l3UkX1c>; Iván Vélez, “Por el Triunfo de la Desmelladización,” *Club Libertad Digital*, April 23, 2021, <https://www.clublibertaddigital.com/ideas/tribuna/2021-04-23/ivan-velez-y-roca-barea-llamo-imbecil-integral-a-blas-infante-6748276/>.

50 Three groups were behind its launch: the Fundación Villacisneros, Valores y Sociedad (both conservative), and the Sociedad de Estudios Contemporáneos Kosmos-Polis. Jesús Palacios, “Presentación del Manifiesto por la Historia y la Libertad,” *Kosmos-Polis*, March 15, 2018, <https://kosmospolis.com/2018/03/presentacion-del-manifiesto-la-historia-la-libertad/>.

51 Nuria Richart, “Elvira Roca: ‘La Iglesia Católica Camina Hacia Su Propia Destrucción’” *Libertad Digital*, June 10, 2018. <https://www.libertaddigital.com/cultura/libros/2018-06-10/elvira-roca-la-iglesia-catolica-camina-hacia-su-propia-destruccion-1276620100/>.

52 Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia*, 16; Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia*, Kindle edition, “Reflexiones finales.”

53 Villacañas, *Imperiofilia*, 13, 260.

54 Federico Navarrete, “Una Polémica Sobre la Hispanidad.

55 Alares López and Acerete de la Corte, “La Extrema Derecha Española,” 103.

56 Pablo Sánchez León, “Pensar Históricamente la(s) Leyenda(s) Negra(s),” 90–91.

57 Edgar Straehle, “El Resurgir Actual de la Leyenda Negra: Entre la Historia, la Memoria y La Política,” *Pasajes*, 60 (2020): 43–66, 50–1; Edgar Straehle, “La Leyenda Negra y los Abusos de la Memoria. Reflexiones Sobre el Nacionalismo Historiográfico Actual en España,” *Con-Ciencia Social* 7 (2024): 13–32, 21–22, 26; Straehle, “Melancolía Imperial,” 68–9. Presumably Straehle means no party since the demise of Ciudadanos.

58 Feijóo accepted cooperation with Vox after the regional elections of May 2023. Tadeu, “Roca Barea: ‘La Unidad a Cambio de Privilegios Regionales Ha Dejado un Reguero de Rencores,’” *The Objective*, May 10, 2023, <https://theobjective.com/cultura/2023-05-10/elvira-roca-barea-brujas-inquisidor/>.

59 Sebastiaan Faber, *Leyendas Negras, Marcas Blancas*, 21–24.

60 For the ideas behind the musical see *Making Malinche: A Documentary by Nacho Cano*, directed by Marta Hermida and Lana Love (Madrid: Nadie Es Perfecto, 2021), <https://www.netflix.com/es-en/title/81238641>.

61 Victor Muñoz, “Educación Madrid. Menos Financiación y Más Blas de Lezo,” *La Izquierda Diario*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.laizquierdadario.com/La-ensenanza-de-Ayuso-menos-financiacion-y-mas-Blas-de-Lezo>.

reception for the ultraliberal President of Argentina, Javier Milei, Ayuso noted Spain and Argentina's shared language, culture and history, and expressed pride in "this great alliance that is 'Hispanidad'...the union of 600 million people who see life according to Western values."⁶² Ayuso is seen as a rising star, identified with the populist wing of the PP open to cooperation with Vox.

Roca Barea's defense of the Spanish Empire has been praised by Vox leader Santiago Abascal.⁶³ After the Andalusian elections of 2018 produced a center-right Ciudadanos-PP coalition with Vox support, Roca Barea commented that the term "extreme right" implied a party working against the political system, whereas Vox was working within it.⁶⁴ The probable impact of her subtle distinction was to help normalize cooperation with Vox, both by the PP and by Ciudadanos, her own local party.⁶⁵

While there are points of convergence between Vox and Roca Barea (recentralization of the state, suspicion of gender ideology, ardent nationalism) there are also differences (her recent criticisms of Catholicism, her lack of respect for Trump). Roca Barea is not a Buenoist, has no appetite for medievalism and largely ignores the *reconquista* [reconquest], a key part of the far-right imaginary referenced in Vox's Islamophobic and anti-immigrant campaigns. She is an individualist, liberal feminist and her latest book tries to rescue Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi in Ancient Rome, from historical neglect.⁶⁶ For Roca Barea, Vox's "solutions may be worse than the disease."⁶⁷

The clearest divergence occurred when she was name-checked by Ramón Tamames, Vox's candidate to replace PSOE premier Pedro Sánchez in a 2023 motion of censure.⁶⁸ Roca Barea found the use of her name "unacceptable" and wondered "why a man of the stature of Tamames [a former Communist opponent of Franco] ends up fronting a political maneuver of the extreme right[!]"⁶⁹ She has indignantly denied any suggestion of fascist sympathies and seems well aware that association with Francoism would toxify her project, preferring to style herself a patriot rather than a nationalist: "nationalism is a disease that the sufferer can only see in others."⁷⁰

Roca Barea herself believes in a free market and a lean, strong state that guarantees a minimum of social justice, a formula that resembles British Thatcherism.⁷¹ In actuality, she helped found the Málaga branch of Ciudadanos, an "extreme center," even "Jacobin" party, created to oppose Catalan separatism.⁷² It spoke of recovering "pride in feeling Spanish."⁷³ Martínez dubs this nationalism the "extreme rightification" of the center, but historically liberalism and nationalism have often been bedfellows.⁷⁴ She admires the liberal Cádiz constitution of 1812 (ignoring its exclusions)

62 "Milei: Ayuso Entrega la Medalla de la Comunidad de Madrid al Presidente Argentino," YouTube video, 33:59. Posted by "RTVE Noticias," June 21, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-YCu3Ah1Tk>.

63 Alares López and Acerete de la Corte, "La Extrema Derecha Española," 105. David Barreira, "Limpiear la Leyenda Negra y Reescribir la Guerra Civil: Otros Cinco 'Hits' Históricos de Vox," *El Español*, January 24 2019, https://www.elspanol.com/cultura/historia/20190124/limpiar-leyenda-negra-guerra-civil-historicos-vox/370714231_0.html.

64 María Elvira Roca Barea, "El problema de España no es Vox," interview by Álvaro Sánchez León, January 19, 2019, <https://asanleo.com/2019/01/19/el-problema-de-espana-no-es-vox-sino-que-haya-dejado-de-existir-un-partido-de-izquierdas-capaz-de-generar-mayorias-integradoras-en-el-sistema-constitucional-y-defensor-de-la-unidad-del-pais/>.

65 The distinction is theoretically defensible. Mudde divides the far right into the anti-system extreme right and the within-system radical right. Cas Mudde, "The Far Right and the European Elections," *Current History* 113 (2014): 98–103.

66 Elvira Roca Barea, *Ingrata Patria*. Her style of feminism places her outside the progressive Spanish mainstream.

67 Tadeu, "Roca Barea: 'La Unidad a Cambio de Privilegios Regionales.'

68 Enric Juliana, "El Destello Antiamericano," *La Vanguardia*, March 22, 2023, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20230322/8843050/destello-antiamericano.html>; Cortes Generales, *Diario de sesiones del congreso de diputados*, XIV Legislatura Núm.255, Sesión plenaria núm. 246, March 21, 2023, 32, https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CONG/DS/PL/DSCD-14-PL-255.PDF.

69 Note the changed terminology. Tadeu, "Roca Barea: 'La Unidad a Cambio de Privilegios Regionales.'"

70 Roca Barea, "Elvira Roca Barea Contesta a El País"; Julio Tovar, "Elvira Roca Barea: 'El Nacionalismo Es una Enfermedad Que, El Que la Tiene, Solo Puede Verla en Otros,'" *Jot Down*, June 2021, <https://www.jotdown.es/2021/06/elvira-roca-barea/>.

71 Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia*, 17. Andrew Gamble (ed.), *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1994).

72 Teresa Giménez Barbat, "La Valentía de Elvira Roca Barea," *OK Diario*, January 2, 2020, <https://okdiario.com/opinion/valentia-elvira-roca-barea-4992177>; Miguel Martínez, "El Imperio del Extremo Centro," *Ctxt: Contexto y Acción*, no. 148, December 2017, <https://ctxt.es/es/20171220/Politica/16846/imperio-colonialismo-roca-barea-imperiofobia-cs.htm>; Estefanía Molina, "Podemos y Su Falso Disfraz 'Plurinacional,'" *El País*, April 18, 2024, <https://elpais.com/opinion/2024-04-18/podemos-y-su-falso-disfraz-plurinacional.html>. The Ciudadanos project is now close to defunct. To date (August 2025) scholarly commentaries on Roca Barea have not noticed her activism in Ciudadanos, though Martínez notices her endorsement of a candidate for MEP.

73 "La Plataforma de Cs Se Reúne Hoy en Málaga Con Cambio de Escenario Político: Nuevo Gobierno y Bajada en los Sondeos," *El Periódico*, June 16, 2018. <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20180616/plataforma-cs-reune-hoy-malaga-6880537>.

74 Martínez, "El Imperio del Extremo Centro."

and supports Spain's 1978 constitution (though urging recentralization).⁷⁵ Like Roca Barea, the Cádiz liberals upheld both the ideal of empire and centralized peninsular government. She laments the leadership of Ciudadanos that led to the party's drift rightwards and its effective demise by 2023.

Though it would not please either Ayuso or Abascal, Roca Barea has advocated a "great pact" between the PSOE and PP to avoid dependence on minority parties. She counterintuitively claims her work is "left leaning," laments the tendency of the PSOE under Pedro Sánchez to make pacts with peripheral nationalists, and praises former Andalusian PSOE leader Susana Díaz, Sánchez's one-time rival for the party leadership, as the "last bulwark" against dependence on minority parties.⁷⁶

This in turn helps explain why her admirers include not just former leftists like Tamames but current ones such as Felipe González, Isabel Coixet, Susana Díaz and Josep Borrell.⁷⁷ This is more than a matter of an older generation drifting rightward, like Vargas Llosa (another admirer). It is true that Borrell, who has voiced Eurocentric cultural prejudices, has been labelled a reactionary by left-wing critics.⁷⁸ But Coixet, a humanitarian, feminist and vocal supporter of Pedro Sánchez, makes an unlikely reactionary figure.

A key characteristic they all share is opposition to Catalan nationalism, which itself has some arguably conservative aims including fiscal sovereignty and immigration control.⁷⁹ The battle to win over international opinion has led figures like Borrell to seek to restore Spain's image abroad. Some implications of this are discussed in the next section. Unsurprisingly, Roca Barea has no supporters among peripheral nationalists.

It also appears that coming to terms with the imperial past is unfinished business for the PSOE. In 2024, the diplomatic row between Mexico and Spain over an apology for colonialism reignited when King Felipe VI was not invited to the inauguration of Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum. The reaction in Spanish press and politics was one of widespread indignation about the "unacceptable" Mexican snub, extending transversely across party lines from Vox to the Socialist PSOE. Not only Roca Barea herself but Socialist premier Pedro Sánchez and *El País* attacked Sheinbaum as motivated by a self-interested attempt to cover up her own problems.⁸⁰ One PSOE regional baron claimed that López Obrador hated Spain and Spaniards, while parties to the left of the PSOE attacked the monarchy rather than colonialism.⁸¹

A plausible explanation for this is anxiety that admitting imperial wrongdoings could appear to some PSOE voters as 'unpatriotic.' When Sumar's Ernest Urtasun talked about decolonizing museums and was labelled "Minister for the Black Legend" by the right-wing press, he was given little support by his PSOE coalition colleagues. The wider debate among the Spanish public is undeveloped. López-Linares' Roca Barea-inspired film has been shown on RTVE (Spanish public television) without any attempt to make or show a counterbalancing documentary.⁸²

Placing Roca Barea politically is complicated by her inconsistencies. Given her clear disavowal of Vox and the demise of Ciudadanos, it appears that her values align most comfortably with the populist right wing of the PP. However, Roca Barea positions herself as a centrist and 'transversely' attracts some support from the Socialist left. The explanation for this paradox lies in the ideological division within the PSOE over how to respond to separatism, the desire of some of its supporters to defend Spain's image against Catalan nationalists, and the fear of alienating some of its voters by espousing postcolonial critiques.

75 Neither slavery nor the slave trade was abolished. Women, men of African descent and household servants were also denied full citizenship, though African men could apply based on merit and respectability.

76 Tadeu, "Roca Barea: 'La Unidad a Cambio de Privilegios Regionales'; Roca Barea, "El problema de España no es Vox." In fact, Díaz's regional government depended on Ciudadanos support. As to "left leaning", it is true that Roca Barea had nine articles published by *El País* between 2017 and 2019.

77 Straehle also notes Roca Barea's left-wing political support. Straehle, "Melancolía Imperial," 40.

78 Neus Tomàs, "Borrell es un Militante Enloquecido Contra el Independentismo con Patente de Corso," *El Diario*, January 31, 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/politica/borrell-militante-enloquecido-independentismo-patente_128_1722440.html.

79 Paradoxically, Roca Barea has more recently called for Cataluña to be expelled from Spain.

80 Elvira Roca Barea, "El Triunfo de las Patrias Chicas"; Editorial, "Mal Paso de Sheinbaum," *El País*, September 26, 2024, <https://elpais.com/opinion/2024-09-26/mal-paso-de-sheinbaum.html> The most popular readers' comments were hostile to Sheinbaum; "La Noche en 24 Horas – 26/09/24," RTVE video, <https://www.rtve.es/play/videos/la-noche-en-24h/26-09-24/16264484/>, comments by Pedro Sánchez at 1:05:41.

81 "La Noche en 24 Horas – 26/09/24," comments by García Page and Iona Belarra, 1:12:13 and 1:06:56.

82 *España la Primera Globalización*, directed by José Luis López-Linares (Madrid: Lopez-Li Films, 2021), DVD.

4 Hispanophobia, Real and Imagined

The success of a book called *Imperiofobia y la Leyenda Negra* might suggest that the Spanish are proud of their Empire's history. However, a 2020 poll found the Spanish largely indifferent to their imperial past.⁸³ Only 11% thought it "more something to be proud of than ashamed." Spain was less nostalgic for empire than the Netherlands, UK and France. This suggests that readers may be more concerned about perceived Hispanophobia (the *leyenda negra*) than moved by love of empire.

Sebastiaan Faber has written about Spain's "unhealthy obsession" with the *leyenda negra*. Like Roca Barea, he adopts a psychological approach to the Spanish public, but where she diagnoses a lack of self-esteem, he diagnoses paranoia, skewering diverse examples of Spanish hypersensitivity to foreign criticism.⁸⁴ Indeed, anti-*leyenda negra* works amount almost to a genre in Spain, and Emilia Landaluce has dubbed *Imperiofobia* "a self-help book for the Spanish."⁸⁵ Of course, Roca Barea's belief in an ongoing campaign of defamation of Spain by 'Protestant' powers lacks credibility.

The Catalan *procés* did put Spain's image in the international spotlight. To separatists, criticism of Spain's imperial past is grist to their mill, a complement to their narrative of 'internal colonialism.' The Empire is portrayed as a purely Castilian affair, a convenient half-truth that obscures, for example, how Catalonia benefited from the Cuban slave trade.⁸⁶ Conversely, Spanish nationalists depict criticism of the Empire as *leyenda negra* and Hispanophobia, a rhetorical inversion in which the former imperial power becomes the improbable victim of racism.⁸⁷ Fradera and Portillo

comment that both Spanish and Catalan nationalists abuse history for political ends.⁸⁸

It is implausible to attribute all Spanish perceptions of Hispanophobia to paranoia: in response to criticism over Gaza, Israel poured scorn on Spain for the Inquisition.⁸⁹ Faber notably does not mention Donald Trump. It is also important to note the various cultural and geopolitical cues which wound Spanish sensibilities and provoke a heightened sensitivity.⁹⁰ These are partly specific to Spain and may give Spanish imperial apologetics a slightly different trajectory to the same phenomenon in the UK, for example.

American Hispanist Richard Kagan recalls the image of Spain as "a country whose contribution to Western history did not merit serious scholarly investigation," and though that has changed, in 2004 Samuel Huntington identified culturally resistant Hispanic migrants as a threat to US national identity, warning of a *reconquista* of "Mexifornia." Subsequently Acemoglu and Robinson portrayed Spain's colonial legacy as the failed counterpart to successful capitalist Anglo-American institutions.⁹¹ In a mirror image, since 1898 the Spanish "empire of the spirit" has been contrasted with the "empire of the material and of money" of the United States.⁹² One of Roca Barea's most popular videos is an interview with 'Iberophone' Marxist Santiago Armesilla, a critic of US settler colonialism and capitalism.⁹³

In Europe, Germany dominates EU finance. Roca Barea blames Spain's tough treatment by the markets during the financial crisis on the *leyenda*. There is, in fact, research

⁸³ Matthew Smith, "How Unique Are British Attitudes to Empire?," *YouGov UK*, March 11, 2020, <https://yougov.co.uk/international/articles/28355-how-unique-are-british-attitudes-empire>.

⁸⁴ Faber, *Leyendas Negras, Marcas Blancas*; Anholt, "Why Brand?"

⁸⁵ Edgar Straehle, "El Resurgir Actual de la Leyenda Negra," 43–45; Emilia Landaluce, *No Somos Fachas, Somos Españoles* (Madrid: La Esfera de los Libros, 2018) cited in Edgar Straehle, "Melancolía Imperial," 40; Alares and Acerete, "La Extrema Derecha," 108.

⁸⁶ Martín Rodrigo y Alharilla, "¿Qué Sentido Tiene Celebrar Hoy Día la Figura de los Indianos en Cataluña? Nostalgia Imperial y Blanqueamiento de la Esclavitud," *Conversación Sobre la Historia*, November 24, 2024, <https://conversacionsobrehistoria.info/2024/11/16/que-sentido-tiene-celebrar-hoy-dia-la-figura-de-los-indianos-en-cataluna-nostalgia-imperial-y-blanqueamiento-de-la-esclavitud/>.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Tomás Calvo Buezas, "El Odio a España y a Su Historia en Internet y en las Encuestas a Estudiante," *Cuadernos de Análisis*, 75 (2021): 25–53.

⁸⁸ Josep Maria Fradera and José María Portillo Valdes, "Comprender el Pasado Para Comprometer el Futuro," *El País*, November 29, 2023, <https://elpais.com/opinion/2023-11-29/comprender-el-pasado-para-comprometer-el-futuro.html>.

⁸⁹ Ana Iris Simón, "Israel y la Leyenda Negra Antiespañola," *El País*, June 1, 2024, <https://elpais.com/opinion/2024-06-01/israel-y-la-leyenda-negra-antiespanola.html>.

⁹⁰ Straehle notes the survival of clichés about Spain. Straehle, "El Resurgir Actual de la Leyenda Negra," 64.

⁹¹ Richard L. Kagan, "Prescott's Paradigm: American Historical Scholarship and the Decline of Spain," *American Historical Review* 101, no.2 (April 1996): 423–46, 440; Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 246. See also Jack Citrin et al., "Testing Huntington: Is Hispanic Immigration a Threat to American Identity?," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no.1 (March 2007): 31–48; Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* (London: Profile Books, 2013) esp. chs. 1, 8, 12, 13.

⁹² Villacañas, *Imperiofilia*, 23.

⁹³ "Imperiofobia, Leyenda Negra y Fracosología," YouTube video, 1:46:40. Posted by "Santiago Armesilla," February 17, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27FntehDLfs>.

showing that Spain suffered stereotyping.⁹⁴ The fierce December 2023 clash between PSOE premier Pedro Sánchez and conservative German MEP Manfred Weber can be seen as not just European left versus right but as a defense of Spain's "full democracy" against the condescension of northern Europe.⁹⁵

Culturally, anglophones are prominent in the international film, television, music and media industries. The 24th Latin Grammys of Seville in 2023 were the first ever held outside the US. In academia, anglophones play leading roles in publishing and rankings, and there are incentives to publish in English: a reality which has been labelled 'language imperialism'.⁹⁶ In Spain, Spanish-English bilingual education has proved divisive among students and teachers in secondary education. Roca Barea's native Andalucía has been exoticized by travelers and tourists. Listening to her talk about how her homeland has been distorted by the foreign gaze, one might almost mistake her for a postcolonial critic.⁹⁷

None of this is to suggest that the *leyenda negra* lives, or that Hispanics are regularly defamed by Anglo-Saxon enemies. It is to observe that there are cultural and geopolitical factors, plus occasional real examples of Hispanophobia, that allow Roca Barea's ideas to gain traction beyond the circles of the populist right, to soothe what Isabel Coixet sees as Spain's damaged self-esteem.⁹⁸

5 Nation Branding or Mythistory?

Faber has theorized Spain's fixation on the *leyenda negra* using Simon Anholt's concept of 'nation branding'.⁹⁹ He is

justifiably cynical about the idea of public relations for nation-states, although the carefully cultivated images of 'developmental dictatorship' and 'European democracy' were vital to Franco and his democratic successors respectively.¹⁰⁰

Though concerned with Spain's international image, *Imperiofobia* is too oriented to a domestic audience to be interpreted as 'nation branding.' Compare Greg Grandin's *America, América*. Grandin's objective is to increase the appreciation of Iberoamerican history in North America. His strategy is to concede the brutality of colonial violence, while highlighting a more positive counternarrative focused on the contributions of figures like Las Casas and Francisco de Vitoria to humanitarianism and international law. This is a strategy well-attuned to the values of a North American audience.¹⁰¹ By contrast, Roca Barea praises Vitoria but ignores his reservations about Spanish imperialism and damns Las Casas as an unreliable propagandist. This is a strategy calculated to ease only Spanish feelings. *Imperiofobia* is written for "local consumption."¹⁰²

Roca Barea has talked about the need to construct a "helpful" history for Spaniards.¹⁰³ The book appears to be an attempt to create what William McNeill would have termed 'mythistory,' a set of beliefs about a common past that sustain a group's capacity for collective action and its ability to survive, though McNeill was careful to note that "some myth histories are more adequate to the facts than others" and that they can be harmful.¹⁰⁴ Her work is about a Spain facing break-up and postcolonial resentment. Her answer is neither Ortega's Europeanism nor uncritical pro-Americanism, but pride in a selectively reworked past for the national community, "a Hispanic world with a future" for the international.¹⁰⁵ This is not to argue that her mythistory succeeds. The extensive criticism *Imperiofobia* has

⁹⁴ Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia*, 457–71; Jonas Van Vossle, "Framing PIGS: Patterns of Racism and Neocolonialism in the Euro Crisis," *Patterns of Prejudice* 50, no. 1 (2016): 1–20; Luís Capucha et al., "The Role of Stereotyping in Public Policy Legitimation: The Case of the PIGS Label," *Comparative Sociology* 13 (2014): 482–502.

⁹⁵ Agencias, "Sánchez se indigna con Weber por amenazarle con una comisión de investigación si se aprueba la amnistía," *Onda Cero*, December 13, 2023, https://www.ondacero.es/noticias/espaa/sanchez-indigna-weber-amenazarle-comision-investigacion-aprueba-amnistia_202312136579af04d670370001a8b414.html.

⁹⁶ Robert Phillipson, *Language Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁹⁷ "Clase Magistral de Elvira Roca: 'Ronda: Entre el Mito Romántico y la Realidad,' YouTube video, 1:38:59. Posted by "Fundación General de la Universidad de Málaga," July 8, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmL4ukKV3Hg>. See also Straehle, "Historia y Leyenda," 133.

⁹⁸ See Isabel Coixet's endorsement on the cover of Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia*.

⁹⁹ Anholt, "Why Brand? Some Practical Considerations for Nation Branding."

¹⁰⁰ Faber, *Leyendas Negras, Marcas Blancas*, 38ff; Sebastian Balfour and Alejandro Quiroga, *The Reinvention of Spain: Nation and Identity since Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 161–95; Nicolás Sesma, *Ni Una, Ni Grande, Ni Libre: La Dictadura Franquista (1939–1977)* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2024), 363.

¹⁰¹ Greg Grandin, *America, América: A New History of the New World* (London: Penguin Random House, 2025).

¹⁰² Pablo Sánchez León, "Pensar Históricamente la(s) Leyenda(s) Negra(s)," 91.

¹⁰³ Roca Barea, "Hispanidad con futuro," 22:26.

¹⁰⁴ William H. McNeill, "Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History and Historians," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 1 (1986): 1–10.

¹⁰⁵ Although Villacañas sees her as pro-American, since Trump's first presidency she has emphasized the tensions between the Hispanic world and the USA.

received makes it doubtful that it is “adequate to the facts.” As for usefulness, she is notably silent about the Civil War and Franco, while her ‘Hispanic’ vision is not truly inclusive, with the Philippines and Africa excluded and decolonial and indigenist critics in Hispanic America ignored.¹⁰⁶ Spanish citizens or migrants of Moroccan, Equatorial Guinean or Filipino heritage will find no point of connection. Nor will those with a plurinational vision of Spain: 1812 becomes Spain’s year zero, with the unitary ideas of that constitution affirmed.

This lack of a civic vision of Spanish national identity is the more curious as she rejects the reactionary notion of a trans-historical Spanish *ser* or being. She sees essentialism as condemning Spain to be chained to its imperial baggage: “All those who sign up to seeking forgiveness share the same mystical idea of Spain as an immutable historical essence.”¹⁰⁷ While she agrees with Kumar that empires are by definition multinational and celebrates culturally hybrid Amerindian baroque music, her dominant theme is of Spain spreading a single shared culture, a more assimilationist than multicultural vision.¹⁰⁸ Her own values (as opposed to those of the Habsburg and Bourbon empires) resemble those of liberal imperialism, justifying colonial violence with a “narrative of reform and progress.”¹⁰⁹

6 Conclusion: From Empire to International Public History

Despite its promise, *Imperiofobia* does not offer a comprehensive defense of empires. Although Roca Barea’s ideas sometimes overlap with Nigel Biggar’s defense of the British Empire, they are ultimately incompatible.¹¹⁰ Britain’s failings are used to underline Spain’s virtues.

¹⁰⁶ Pablo Sánchez León, “Pensar Históricamente la(s) Leyenda(s) Negra(s),” 91; Federico Navarrete, “Una Polémica Sobre la Hispanidad”; Edgar Straehle, “El Resurgir Actual de la Leyenda Negra,” 53–5.

¹⁰⁷ Roca Barea argues today’s Mexicans are closer to the conquistadors than today’s Spaniards. Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia*, Kindle edition, “Reflexiones finales.” Edgar Straehle also notes that she rejects the notion of a Spanish *ser*. Edgar Straehle, “Melancolía Imperial,” 51. The notion of a Spanish *ser* is associated with de Maeztu.

¹⁰⁸ Krishan Kumar, *Empires: A Historical and Political Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), Kindle edition, ch. 4. Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia*, 119, 378.

¹⁰⁹ Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (London: Bodley Head, 2022), 17.

¹¹⁰ Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning* (London: William Collins, 2023), Kindle edition.

Even so, Roca Barea increasingly stresses the international dimensions of her work. Recently she has emphasized the pan-Hispanic dimensions of the 1898 ‘disaster’.¹¹¹ She argues that independence left Hispanic American successor states politically fragmented, indebted and vulnerable; the defeat of Spain by the US in 1898 was foreshadowed by the US defeat of Mexico in 1845–8.¹¹² Some years back, Gustavo Bueno suggested that Spain should unite with Mercosur as an alternative to the European Union.¹¹³ Roca Barea does not go that far but does see pan-Hispanic unity as a geopolitical necessity. It is no coincidence that in 2019 she directed a summer course at the University of Málaga on “Geopolitics and the Black Legend.”¹¹⁴

What she is now promoting is therefore a potentially truly *international* public history. Nationalist public history defends the nation-state, its people, its national identity and its image.¹¹⁵ Instead, Roca Barea goes beyond to conjure a vision of a mixed ethnic, transnational Hispanic world with a shared past (that she rewrites) and a common future. However, the calls for Spain to apologize for colonialism, the critiques of Navarrete, the hostile comments of a Mexican daily, her lack of dialogue with her transatlantic critics and the cultural narrowness of her vision all suggest that her influence will be deeply contested in Hispanic America.¹¹⁶ She has not yet campaigned there, despite the sympathetic views of some local historians and the work of López-Linares’ YouTube *Canal Hispanidad*.¹¹⁷ Whether a public history written to please a metropolitan audience can succeed in Spain’s former

¹¹¹ Elvira Roca Barea, “El Triunfo de las Patrias Chicas,” *The Objective*, October 2, 2024, <https://www.theobjective.com/elsubjetivo/hispanidad-y-patria-grande/2024-10-02/triunfo-patrias-chicas/>; Elvira Roca Barea, “500 millones Que No Tienen Nombre,” *The Objective*, October 4, 2024, <https://www.theobjective.com/elsubjetivo/hispanidad-y-patria-grande/2024-10-04/500-millones-nombre-hispanoamerica/>; Elvira Roca Barea, “La Maldición de la Koiné,” *The Objective*, October 7, 2024, <https://www.theobjective.com/elsubjetivo/opinion/2024-10-07/la-maldicion-de-la-koine/>. Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia*, 34.

¹¹² Elvira Roca Barea, “El Triunfo de las Patrias Chicas.”

¹¹³ Edgar Straehle, “Melancolía Imperial,” 61–62.

¹¹⁴ “Curso de Verano: Geopolítica y Leyenda Negra,” Filosofía en Español, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.filosofia.org/bol/reu/bre0039.htm>.

¹¹⁵ McNeill, “Mythistory,” 4–7. Biggar’s *Colonialism* is framed principally as a defence of the United Kingdom, though he has subsequently given talks in Australia and New Zealand.

¹¹⁶ Federico Navarrete, “Una Polémica Sobre la Hispanidad”; “Vox, Cortés y el Revisionismo Colonial de la Ultraderecha,” *La Jornada*, October 12, 2024, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2024/10/12/opinion/013a2pol>.

¹¹⁷ E.g. the Argentine Marcelo Gullo, the Venezuelan Carlos Leáñez Aristimuño and the Mexican Martín Ríos Saloma. “Not yet” as of August 2025.

possessions must be highly doubtful, because in the metropole itself, coming to terms with the legacy of empire still has far to go.¹¹⁸

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¹¹⁸ Of course, Spain is not unique in this. For the British case, see Lester, *Deny and Disavow*.